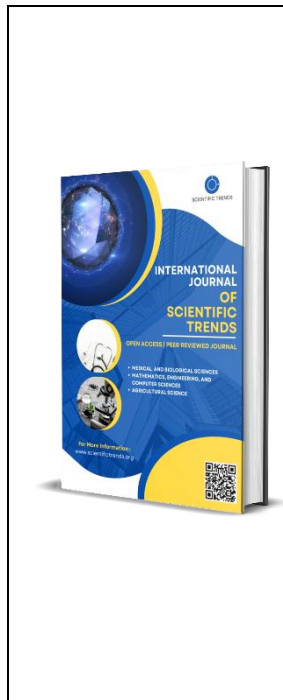


Gamification and Student Motivation in Freshman English Speaking Classes

Nilufar Davronova

ESL Teacher, Tashkent International
University of Finance and Technology



Abstract

This study investigates the effects of gamification on the speaking motivation of freshman EFL students at Tashkent International University of Finance and Technology (TIFT), Uzbekistan. Employing a mixed-methods design that combined Likert-scale questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations, the research examined students' responses to four gamification tools and activities: Kahoot!, Quizlet, Quizizz, and structured debates. Findings indicate that digital gamification platforms, particularly Quizlet and Quizizz, significantly enhanced students' motivation and engagement, while debate activities produced more varied responses. Students expressed a strong desire for continued gamification integration while simultaneously recognising its limitations as a substitute for authentic communicative practice. These results suggest that gamification is most effective when deployed strategically as a motivational scaffold within a broader communicative language teaching framework.

Keywords: Gamification, EFL, speaking motivation, freshman students, Kahoot!, Quizlet, Uzbekistan.

Introduction

Background

In the contemporary landscape of higher education, student engagement and motivation remain central concerns for language educators. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, particularly at the university level, faces the persistent challenge of maintaining student motivation in speaking classes, where anxiety, limited exposure, and low confidence frequently hinder learning outcomes. In recent years, gamification — defined as the application of game design elements and mechanics in non-game contexts — has emerged as a promising pedagogical strategy to address these challenges (Deterding et al., 2011).

Gamification in EFL classrooms typically involves the integration of digital and interactive tools such as point systems, leaderboards, competitive quizzes, and collaborative challenges. Platforms such as Kahoot!, Quizlet, and Quizizz have gained considerable popularity among language teachers worldwide due to their accessibility, interactivity, and capacity to simulate game-like experiences within structured learning environments (Subhash & Cudney, 2018).

Problem Statement

Despite growing interest in gamification as an instructional approach, empirical evidence regarding its effectiveness in developing speaking motivation among EFL students — particularly at the freshman university level — remains limited. Most existing studies focus on reading and writing skills or are conducted in Western educational contexts, leaving a gap in understanding how gamification functions within Central Asian EFL settings, where students bring distinct cultural, linguistic, and motivational backgrounds to the classroom.

Research Context

This study was conducted at Tashkent International University of Finance and Technology (TIFT), Uzbekistan, where English is a compulsory subject for all freshman students regardless of their major. The participants were freshman EFL students enrolled in speaking-focused English courses. Given the university's emphasis on professional English proficiency, developing speaking motivation among first-year students is of particular institutional importance.

Research Gap and Aim

While gamification has been broadly advocated in language teaching literature, few studies have examined its motivational effects within the Uzbek higher education context. This study aims to fill that gap by investigating the impact of gamification tools — specifically Kahoot!, Quizlet, Quizizz, and structured debate activities — on the motivation of freshman EFL students in speaking classes at TIFT. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys, classroom observation, and interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of students' motivational responses.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- How does the integration of gamification tools affect freshman EFL students' motivation in speaking classes at TIFT?
- What aspects of gamification do students perceive as most and least motivating?
- What contextual factors moderate the relationship between gamification and speaking motivation?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments to investigate the effects of gamification on freshman EFL students' speaking motivation. The mixed-methods approach was selected to allow for triangulation of findings across survey responses, classroom observations, and student interviews, thereby enhancing the validity and depth of the analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Participants

The participants of this study consisted of 20–40 freshman EFL students enrolled in compulsory English speaking courses at Tashkent International University of Finance and Technology (TIFT),

Uzbekistan. Participants were selected through convenience sampling, as they were the researcher's own teaching groups. All participants were first-year university students at the beginner-to-intermediate proficiency level, with Uzbek or Russian as their first language.

Instruments

Three data collection instruments were employed in this study:

Likert-Scale Questionnaire. A structured questionnaire consisting of Likert-scale items (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) was administered to all participants. The questionnaire measured students' perceived motivation, enjoyment, engagement, and willingness to participate in speaking activities before and after gamification interventions. Items were adapted from established motivation scales in EFL research (Dörnyei, 2001).

Semi-Structured Interviews. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with more than ten volunteer participants following the gamification sessions. Interview questions explored students' personal experiences with the gamification tools, their perceived impact on speaking motivation, and any challenges or drawbacks they encountered. Interviews were conducted in a combination of English and Uzbek to ensure clarity and comfort for participants.

Classroom Observation. The researcher conducted systematic observation across the gamification sessions, noting levels of student participation, engagement, enthusiasm, and interaction patterns during activities. Observational notes were recorded using a structured observation checklist.

Procedure

The study was carried out over the course of several English speaking classes at TIUFT. During these sessions, four gamification tools and activities were integrated into the speaking curriculum:

- Kahoot! — used for competitive vocabulary and grammar quizzes to warm up speaking sessions
- Quizlet Live — employed for collaborative vocabulary building and team-based interaction
- Quizizz — used for individual self-paced practice with immediate feedback
- Structured Debates — incorporated as a higher-order speaking task encouraging argumentation and spontaneous speech

Each tool was introduced sequentially across separate class sessions, allowing students to experience a range of gamification formats. The questionnaire was administered following the completion of the gamification sessions, and interviews were conducted shortly thereafter.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the Likert-scale questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean scores and frequency distributions, to identify overall trends in student motivation. Qualitative data from interviews and classroom observations were analyzed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. Themes were identified inductively from the data and cross-referenced with quantitative findings to produce an integrated interpretation.

RESULTS

Quantitative Findings

The Likert-scale questionnaire results revealed generally positive student attitudes toward gamification tools, though with notable variation across different platforms and activity types.

Responses regarding Kahoot! and Quizizz indicated strong agreement among participants, with 90% of students reporting that these platforms helped them memorize grammar rules more easily and rapidly than traditional methods. Mean scores for items related to engagement and enjoyment during these sessions were consistently high, suggesting that competitive quiz-based formats effectively captured students' attention and reinforced language retention in a low-pressure environment.

Responses regarding Quizlet were even more unanimous. All participants (100%) agreed that Quizlet facilitated vocabulary acquisition, reporting that the platform's flashcard and matching mechanisms made it significantly easier to commit new words to memory. This finding represents the strongest positive result across all gamification tools used in the study.

Debate activities, however, produced more varied responses. While a portion of students demonstrated high engagement and willingness to participate in argumentation tasks, a considerable number expressed preference for other formats, suggesting that debate as a gamified speaking activity may not suit all learner profiles equally at the freshman level.

Qualitative Findings

Classroom observations consistently indicated heightened student motivation and participation during sessions where digital gamification tools were integrated. Students displayed increased attentiveness, spontaneous interaction, and visible enthusiasm compared to non-gamified lessons. The researcher noted that the competitive and collaborative elements of Kahoot!, Quizizz, and Quizlet Live appeared to lower affective barriers, encouraging even hesitant students to participate more actively in speaking tasks.

Interview data further enriched these findings. The majority of interviewed students expressed a strong desire for greater integration of gamification tools across all English classes, indicating that the novelty and interactivity of these platforms had a tangible positive effect on their overall attitude toward language learning. At the same time, a recurring theme across multiple interviews was the recognition that gamification, while enjoyable and motivating, does not substitute for authentic speaking practice. Several students explicitly acknowledged that real communicative tasks — such as open discussions and presentations — remain essential for developing genuine speaking fluency.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study both support and nuance existing literature on gamification in EFL contexts. The overwhelmingly positive reception of Kahoot!, Quizizz, and Quizlet aligns with Subhash and Cudney's (2018) argument that game-based digital tools enhance learner engagement by introducing elements of competition, immediate feedback, and reward into the classroom environment. The particularly strong results for Quizlet suggest that spaced repetition and interactive recall mechanisms are especially effective for vocabulary acquisition among freshman EFL learners, consistent with findings reported by Godwin-Jones (2011).

The 90% agreement rate regarding grammar retention through Kahoot! and Quizizz supports Dörnyei's (2001) motivational framework, which emphasizes the role of immediate success experiences in sustaining learner motivation. When students receive instant feedback and visible scores, their sense of competence — a key motivational driver — is reinforced, creating a positive cycle of engagement and effort.

However, the mixed results observed during debate sessions introduce an important qualification to an otherwise positive picture. This finding suggests that not all gamification formats are equally effective across different learner profiles and proficiency levels. Freshmen, who are still developing both linguistic competence and academic confidence, may find highly open-ended competitive speaking tasks more anxiety-inducing than motivating. This is consistent with Horwitz et al.'s (1986) research on foreign language anxiety, which identifies spontaneous oral production as a particularly high-anxiety activity for beginner and intermediate learners.

Perhaps the most theoretically significant finding, however, emerges from the interview data. Students' simultaneous desire for more gamification and their acknowledgment of its limitations reflects a sophisticated metacognitive awareness of their own learning needs. This dual perception — gamification as motivational catalyst but not as a replacement for authentic communication — suggests that the most effective pedagogical approach lies in using gamification strategically as a scaffold rather than as a primary instructional mode. These findings echo Kapp's (2012) recommendation that gamification be integrated as a complementary layer within a broader communicative language teaching framework, rather than adopted as a standalone methodology. The contextual setting of this study — a Uzbek university environment where students bring distinct cultural and linguistic backgrounds — also adds an important dimension to these findings. The strong positive response to structured, rule-based gamification tools may partly reflect learners' familiarity and comfort with structured learning formats, while the mixed response to debates may indicate the need for more culturally responsive scaffolding before open-ended speaking tasks are introduced.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the relationship between gamification and speaking motivation among freshman EFL students at Tashkent International University of Finance and Technology, Uzbekistan. The findings provide evidence that gamification tools — particularly Kahoot!, Quizizz, and Quizlet — have a meaningful positive impact on student motivation, engagement, and language retention in EFL speaking classes. However, the study also reveals important nuances: not all gamification formats yield uniformly positive results, and students themselves recognise that gamification functions best as a motivational complement to, rather than a replacement for, authentic communicative practice.

These findings carry significant implications for EFL practitioners, particularly those working in Central Asian university contexts. Teachers are encouraged to adopt a selective and strategic approach to gamification, choosing tools that align with specific learning objectives and student proficiency levels. For vocabulary development, Quizlet emerges as a particularly powerful tool, while Kahoot! and Quizizz are well-suited to grammar reinforcement and warm-up activities. Debate and open-ended speaking tasks, while valuable, may require additional scaffolding and preparation at the freshman level to reduce anxiety and maximise engagement.

This study is not without limitations. The relatively small sample size, the short duration of the intervention, and the single-institutional context limit the generalisability of the findings. Future research should consider longitudinal designs, larger and more diverse samples, and comparative studies across different Uzbek universities to provide a more comprehensive understanding of gamification's role in EFL motivation.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on gamification in EFL education and underscores the importance of contextually sensitive, evidence-based pedagogical decision-making in language teaching.

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